TWO

Scenarios for Revolution

The Drama of the Black Panthers

The scene opens in the parking lot of the California state capitol building in Sacramento. It is the spring of 1967. Thirty young black people, twenty-four men and six women, are pulling rifles, twelve-gauge shotguns, and .357-magnum handguns out of their car trunks and loading them. Dressed in uniforms of black berets, black leather jackets, and powder blue shirts, they begin to move in loose formation up the steps to the capitol. One of the young black men on the scene shouts, "Look at Reagan run!" as then governor and future president Ronald Reagan beats a hasty retreat in the face of this phalanx of armed black Americans. But the troops are not especially interested in the governor. They are headed into the legislative chamber. Some hold their guns pointed to the sky, others point them to the ground. As they walk around the outer perimeter of the assembly chamber, people clear a path for them amid many astonished looks. Photographers and TV camera operators are ahead of them, walking backward as they move closer to the doors of the chamber. About five or six feet from the gateway into the assembly hall, a security officer jumps in front of the black man at the head of the action and shouts, "Where the hell are you goin'?" The man calmly replies, "I am going to exercise my constitutional right to see my government making laws, and my right under the second amendment to bear arms."

Someone shouts with alarm, "There are Black Panthers with guns on the second floor of the capitol!" And he is right. It is 2 May 1967, and the men and women who appear to be about to raid the center of government are members of the recently formed Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. They have driven up in a caravan of cars from their headquarters in Oakland.

Some of the armed Panthers make their way onto the assembly floor, others are in the viewing balcony above. As the cameras continue to roll, very confused-looking legislators mumble and shout. Amid much agitation, the Panthers leave the scene and return to the capitol steps, where Panther chairman Bobby Seale, leader of the action, reads Panther minister of defense Huey Newton's "Executive Mandate #1": "The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense calls upon the American people in general and the black people in particular to take careful note of the racist California Legislature which is now considering legislation aimed at keeping black people disarmed and powerless at the very same time that racist police agencies throughout the country are intensifying the terror, brutality, murder and repression of black people."[1] That night, TV news around California, the nation, and the world presented pictures of the dramatic encounter, including Seale reading the mandate, as in the background, possibly for the first time, the noun *motherfucker* makes its way onto broadcast television.

The black power movement was mostly an urban, northern movement complementing, building on, and critiquing the mostly southern, often more rural, civil rights phase of the black freedom movement. Some argue that black power is part of the civil rights struggle, others see it as a break with the movement. It was both. The peak years of black power, roughly 1965–75, brought a profound transformation in American life, inside and beyond black communities. Black power brought a sweeping change in consciousness and identity for black people, and it shaped every level of African American life. While moderate and even conservative voices continued to exist in the black community, the dominant voices of the era spoke the language of black power.

The loudest of these voices belonged to members of the Black Panther Party, who burst onto the stage of history through the "scene" I narrated above. The "real life" events on the capitol steps unfolded in the dramatic way I have told them. The guerrilla theater siege of Sacramento was one of many dramatic moments in what was a very dramatic time. The talking blues, proto-rap artist Gil Scott-Heron sang in 1968 that the "revolution will not be televised." But he was only half right. Much of the revolution going on in America at that time was televised,

or at least reported via the television, and that fact shaped the history of the period in positive and negative ways. The black power phase of the civil rights/black liberation movement dominated much of the iconography and dramaturgy of the late 1960s. The phrase "the drama of the Black Panthers" in my chapter subtitle is meant to name two different things: (1) a body of theater work designed to act as part of the cultural arm of the black power movement; and (2) the fact that much of the black power movement itself, particularly the Black Panther Party, can be understood as a kind of theatrical performance. This second point is not meant to belittle the Black Panthers, but rather to take them more seriously. All politics involves a theatrical element, and a failure to understand the relation between the "poetics" and the "politics" of the Panthers is a failure to understand them at all.[2] Much of the public activity of the Black Panthers was built around highly dramatic, stylized confrontations, often involving guns and the police. These are among the main actions that earned them notoriety. This theatricality was in many ways the most important cultural contribution of the Panthers, but it was also their greatest political limitation.

Hegemony—the process of getting people to unwittingly consent to their own oppression—takes place largely by accretion, by having many, many sites reinforcing the same ideas. In the case of black Americans, many sites in white and black America were very much teaching messages of black intellectual and cultural inferiority at the moment black power arose. The cultural front of the black power movement exerted considerable influence because it managed to launch new messages of black pride and empowerment into so many different spaces on so many levels of culture. The black power movement included an intellectual formation, led by figures as diverse as Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, Ron Karenga, and Stokely Carmichael, among many others, and it spawned an immensely influential new intellectual field, black studies. Black power also included a variety of pervasive cultural formations in the literary and performing arts centered on the notion of an independent "black aesthetic." The black arts/black aesthetic movement reshaped virtually all the arts: jazz and soul music, painting, dance, poetry, and theater. Black power also reshaped black theology, sports, even black folkways. It influenced what people ate ("soul food"), what clothes and hairstyles they wore (African-derived fash-

ions, "natural" or "Afro" hair), what holidays they celebrated (Kwanzaa instead of Christmas), the language they spoke (a "soulful rap" expressing black pride, declaiming that "black is beautiful"), and the gestures they made (black power handshakes, the raised-fist black power salute).

Many of these attributes and styles were said to possess "soul," something like the everyday-life or folk equivalent of the black aesthetic in its celebration of the unique and positive dimensions of black style.[3] Black power cultural forms also reshaped popular culture, particularly music, drawing in previously nonpolitical performers like James Brown ("Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud"), and generating a radical revision of the talking blues in artists like Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets. While music was not as central a force in the black power movement as it had been in the civil rights struggle, it did provide the soundtrack for black power, and even the Black Panthers had their own soul music group, The Lumpens. In sum, virtually no corner of black life remained untouched by radical cultural revisions.

The black power movement had within it a vast array of political ideologies, and its most radical political agenda certainly was not achieved. But as historian William Van Deburg argues, if it did not achieve the political revolution many called for, it did succeed in revolutionizing black consciousness in ways that continue to echo today and have profound political importance. Van Deburg contends that "black power is best understood as a broad, adaptive, cultural term serving to connect and illuminate the differing ideological orientations of the movement's supporters. Conceptualized in this manner, the black power movement does not appear, [as] it so often has, a cacophony of voices and actions resulting in only minuscule gains for black people. Viewing the movement through the window of culture allows us to see that language, folk culture, religion, and the literary and performing arts served to spread the militants' philosophy farther than did mimeographed political broadsides."[4] Especially if one includes speeches among the "performing arts" and also, as I will argue here, certain black power movement actions as "theater," I think this is an important insight. Much of the black power movement's political impact came through cultural channels, but without the political movement that impact would have been much reduced. The changes brought by the movement varied considerably in long-term impact, and the key force accounting for these variations was the degree

to which style changes were connected to specific political ideas and movement fractions.

Black Nationalisms

As we saw at the end of chapter 1, the phrase *black power* had its origin in a highly staged event during the southern struggle. Stokely Carmichael's dramatic use of the new phrase encapsulated an important rhetorical and political shift in the black movement. The move from "freedom now" to "black power" embodied a sense that overthrowing the constraints of segregation would not be enough if substantial shifts in economic and political power failed to follow. The new slogan's immediate effect was to deepen a split in the southern movement, but its larger, long-range impact was mostly in northern ghettos.

Both the flair for dramatic symbolism and the rhetorical weight of the phrase "black power!" moved rapidly to the center of the urban northern phase of the movement. By 1967 "black power" was the term most often used to name the northern struggle. The desperate, angry mood of the ghettos was apparent through a series of "riots" or "urban insurrections," depending on your ideological viewpoint, that tore up America in the 1960s. A series of "long hot summers" began with a violent riot in the African American Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965, and was followed in subsequent years by massive insurrections in Chicago, Detroit, Newark, and a hundred other cities across the country. The government commission investigating the "civil disturbances" found evidence of "two Americas, one Black, one white," moving in opposite directions. The black power movement attempted to give shape to the inchoate "black rage" that fueled the riots, and to turn it into empowerment rather than self-destruction.[5]

Stokely Carmichael's version of "black power" had been sharpened during his organizing of an alternative political party in Lowndes County, Alabama, one of the most dangerous places in the South to organize. The symbol of that party was a black panther, and some folks involved referred to it as the "black panther party." When a year later two brash young black men, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, formed a new political organization in Oakland, California, one of the nation's toughest ghettos, they named that party the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in homage to their Lowndes County predecessors.

The new organization formed by Newton and Seale quickly became the most visible, best known embodiment of the symbolism, rhetoric, and ideology of this black power movement. The movement drew not only on radical currents in the southern struggle, but also on a long history, going back at least to the eighteenth century, of African American ideas and organizing under the concept of "black nationalism." While present in a variety of incarnations with quite different ideological agendas, from conservative to revolutionary, the essence of black nationalism was the notion that in some sense blacks in America were a nation apart. Rather than viewing this as a liability to be overcome through integration into white America, black nationalists argued that black people should organize themselves to reflect pride in their history and culture, and to gain a significant degree of independent economic and political power. Due especially to the work of Malcolm X, black nationalism was a mass force again by the time of his assassination in 1965.

The black nationalism of the 1960s is traditionally divided into two main forms, cultural nationalism and political nationalism. Cultural nationalists stressed the development of independent artistic and cultural forms based in black tradition. Political nationalists stressed contestation with and the need to radically alter the white-dominated political and economic system. I want to complicate this useful but limiting distinction by suggesting that cultural nationalism (represented by individuals like poet-playwright Amiri Baraka) and political nationalism (represented by the Black Panther Party) overlapped and intertwined in significant ways. The distinction was and is a serious one; in at least one case it was a deadly one, when armed conflict broke out between representatives of the "political" Panthers and the "cultural" nationalists of Ron Karenga in Los Angeles. But the cultural/political distinction is also misleading, both because the cultural nationalists had political ideas and impact, and, more to the point of this chapter, because the political nationalists had cultural ideas and impact, an impact made largely through dramatic action.

A New Stage of Struggle

The early 1960s saw the rise of two entwined forces that would have a dramatic impact on the style of the Panthers: the rhetoric of Malcolm X and the theater of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka. I want to outline here a

three-stage evolution of "black power dramatics," from the dramatic speeches of Malcolm X to the plays of Amiri Baraka to the real-life dramatic actions of the Black Panthers. Malcolm was to the northern ghetto what Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. had been to the southern struggle—the great articulator. Malcolm's views on Reverend King and the civil rights struggle changed over time from hostility to respect and qualified support, but throughout his life he argued that conditions in the urban North demanded a different kind of rhetoric and a different kind of strategy than the one used in the southern struggle. Malcolm became the master of a rhetorically violent but carefully legal wake-up call to the urban ghettos. He understood that for blacks in the North the issue was not segregation, though there was plenty of that (missing only the legal sanction given the southern form). Rather, the issue was systematic degradation through a thousand deprivations—poverty, demeaning jobs or unemployment, police brutality, everyday racist insults, inadequate schools, substandard health care—that often led to a sense of self-hatred and despair. Malcolm believed that only a kind of shock therapy addressed to "Negroes" could turn them into proud black actors on the national and world stage. Malcolm's speeches sought, through a metaphor drawn from slave days, to separate out what he called the "house Negro" (or Uncle Tom) who upheld or accepted white racism, from the "field Negroes" who had plotted slave insurrections or violent revenge on the white masters.[6]

At the same time, and under the influence of Malcolm X's rhetoric, a young black poet and playwright named Leroi Jones was turning himself into Amiri Baraka. Jones transformed himself from a Greenwich Village bohemian poet into the playwright Baraka who offered dramatic theater to match the dramatic rhetoric of Malcolm's new black nationalism. As part of a wider black arts movement that included radical poetry, fiction, art, and music, a theater of action aimed to support and/or enact a black revolution rose rapidly in the mid-1960s. The beginnings of black power theater are usually traced to the work of Jones, who, mirroring a larger process of renaming and collective transformation in black identity in the 1960s, gave up his "slave name" to be reborn as Amiri Baraka. Most historians of black culture see the production of Baraka's play *The Dutchman,* in 1964, as the opening salvo in the black theater revolution. *The Slave* followed in that same year, and before long a

whole movement emerged, with dozens of young playwrights following Baraka's lead.

In 1965, in an important symbolic gesture, Baraka moved from Greenwich Village to Harlem, where he began the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BARTS). The school became a testing ground for many black actors and playwrights, as well as a place for Baraka himself to experiment. The civil rights movement had already produced one important theatrical group, the Free Southern Theater, organized by SNCC, and as black power emerged within SNCC that company's work also metamorphosed into a significant black power theatrical force in the South. As it evolved, black power theater took many forms, from full-scale plays to short vignettes meant to be enacted as street theater on corners or lots in the ghetto. The most common form was the one-act play—long enough to develop significant ideas but short enough to reach an audience not used to theater-going. This latter point was important, as the playwrights sought to reach audiences beyond the small middle-class black play-going contingent.

As theater historian Mance Williams describes it, the central task of black power theater was to use dramatic enactments to overcome internalized self-hatred in blacks "who had been brainwashed and psychologically maimed by centuries of physical and mental abuse" (a notion of therapeutic violence found in the immensely influential psychiatrist and theorist of decolonization, Frantz Fanon). For Baraka, violence (rhetorical at least) was a key component of black arts, an element necessary to break through crusted layers of internalized oppression in blacks (and less directly to break through layers of complacency in whites). At the level of style, the black theater movement sought to instill pride by celebrating existing cultural elements in the black community, and synthesizing them into elements of a distinctive "black aesthetic." This meant, according to Williams, that "it would synthesize and codify all those creative and artistic expressions peculiar to Afro-Americans," including not only such indigenous arts forms as gospel music, spirituals, jazz, the blues, and black dance forms, but also such broader cultural styles as black English (black slang, syntax, diction, and speech rhythms) and even elements of black kinesics (ways of walking, gesturing, and body language generally).[7] All these things were, often for the first time, brought into black drama during these revolutionary years. The new

black theater often utilized the "call and response" pattern that was built into black religion and much black music to help create a more participatory experience. Sometimes this was accomplished by putting an actual church service on stage with a minister preaching black power or an on-stage "congregation" challenging the lack of black power rhetoric in a traditional minister. Either way, the audience was encouraged to join in. This not only got a black power message across but also undermined the authority of conservative clergy who often stood in the way of the new radical phase of the movement.

In the spirit of black nationalist independence, Baraka insisted that his Black Arts Theatre be run, produced, directed, and acted entirely by blacks, and performed to all-black audiences. In cases where white characters needed to be played, Baraka had black actors apply "whiteface," in symbolic contrast to the long racist tradition of minstrelsy, in which white artists donned blackface makeup to give stereotyped imitations of blacks. In his own plays, Baraka sometimes created self-consciously stereotyped whites as comic figures. His theater would be a "theater of assault":

> The Revolutionary Theatre, which is now peopled with victims, will soon begin to be peopled with new kinds of heroes . . . not the weak Hamlets debating whether or not they are ready to die for what's on their minds, but men and women (and minds) digging out from under a thousand years of "high art" and weakfaced dalliance. We must make an art that will function as to call down the actual wrath of world spirit. We are witchdoctors, and assassins, but we will open a place for the true scientists to expand our consciousness. This is a theatre of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA. The heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vessey, Patrice Lumumba, but not history, not memory, not sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair; these will be new men, new heroes, and their enemies most of you who are reading this.[8]

Baraka's assaults on white racism and black fear of freedom were very powerful, and played an important role in the creation of a "black aesthetic" throughout the arts that echoes to this day.

At the same time, Baraka's work was also often virulently misogynist, sexist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and based on a confining notion of a biological black essence. One reason to champion Black Panther theater over Baraka's work is that the party took official positions against these hideous views, though certainly many members struggled unevenly with them at the personal level.

Where cultural nationalism often became frozen in black essences, the revolutionary political nationalism of the Panthers continued to evolve as political alliances broadened their vision. Newton expressed his distance from purely cultural nationalists in these words:

> There are two kinds of nationalism, revolutionary nationalism and reactionary nationalism. Revolutionary nationalism is first dependent upon a people's revolution with the end goal being the people in power. . . .
>
> Cultural nationalism, or pork chop nationalism, as I sometimes call it, is basically a problem of having the wrong political perspective. It seems to be a reaction instead of responding to political oppression. The cultural nationalists are concerned with returning to the old African culture and thereby regaining their identity and freedom. In other words, they feel that the African culture will automatically bring political freedom. . . .
>
> The Black Panther Party, which is a revolutionary group of black people, realizes that we have to have an identity. We have to realize our Black heritage in order to give us strength to move on and progress. But as far as returning to the old African culture, it's unnecessary and it's not advantageous in many respects. We believe that culture itself will not liberate us. We're going to need some stronger stuff.[9]

The Panthers' political approach to culture proved richer than Baraka's cultural approach to politics, a fact Baraka himself implicitly acknowledged when he later developed positions closer to the Marxist internationalism of the party.

Revolutionary Consciousness

While the Panthers rejected what Newton called "pork chop" cultural nationalism (as if eating soul food was inherently liberating), they still learned from it, especially from Baraka's black power drama. Baraka's theatrical ideas influenced the Panthers, both directly through encounters with his work (he lived in San Francisco in the late 1960s), and through the playwright-theorist's influence on another key figure in the new black theater movement, Ed Bullins. A young playwright who had studied with Baraka, Bullins became for a brief time minister of culture for the Panthers and was in their orbit during their and his formative years.[10] According to theater historian Williams, it was Bullins who sought to move black power dramatic ideas more out into the community as "street theater."[11] He is a key link along this line of moving theatricality ever more fully into the movement itself.

Bullins was also a founding member of Black House, a community center/theater in San Francisco that was taken over by the Panthers soon after another Black House founder, Eldridge Cleaver, became minister of information for the party. The Panthers' takeover of a community theater is neatly emblematic of my argument that the party became the leading edge of political-cultural theatrical nationalism. While the seizure of Black House, and Bullins's association with the party, offers evidence of the Panthers' direct connection to black power theater, my claim is broader. My notion is that the party took a feel for drama beyond the playhouse into Panther political actions. They took the kind of shock action theatrics practiced by the new black playwrights out of the theaters and into the streets.

Precisely where the interest in drama came from is something of a side issue, but it is a suggestive fact that Panther cofounder Bobby Seale had acted in local plays, and was by Newton's account a brilliant mimic who undermined the political positions of other, less radical white and black leaders through his right-on imitations of their voices and styles: "[Seale] could also imitate down to the last detail some of the brothers around us. I would crack my sides laughing, not only because his imitations were so good, but also because he could convey certain attitudes and characteristics so sharply. He caught all their shortcomings, the way their ideas failed to meet the needs of the people."[12] In a related claim, I suggest that Panther actions were an imitative extension and critique of cultural nationalist theater.

What theater historian Williams says about the theory and practice of black drama in the 1960s could be said equally well of the theory and practice of the Black Panther Party: "Many of the Black Revolutionary Plays were based on myth, but the myth of revolution the Black playwrights created was no less real than if it had actually taken place. Since theatre occurs in the mind, within the imagination of the spectators, the illusion of revolution can affect the audience if its members are willing to accept the possibility of the real events. In most cases these plays were rituals and rites, designed for purposes of purgation and catharsis and intended, through stylistic incantations, to will into reality an actual revolution."[13] As Williams suggests, the line between a "real" revolution and a revolution in consciousness is not absolute. It is in play along this ambiguous line that I would locate the main successes of both black power theater and black power as theater.

Much of this dramatic theory, it seems to me, describes Black Panther ideology as well as the party's manifestos and speeches. Their impact was dramatic, and their drama drove their impact. Certainly in the life consciousness of one of the most famous black revolutionaries of the era, Angela Davis, it was two dramatic events that she recalled as key moments in her political awakening. Davis remembers that it was hearing Malcolm X speak at Brandeis University that first awakened her to blackness, and it was seeing the image of the armed Panthers on the steps of the California legislature that affirmed in her a sense of the possibility of concerted black revolutionary action. Studying in Germany at the time with Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno, Davis saw that image of the Panthers in the local Frankfurt newspaper and knew instantly that something new was abrew in her homeland.[14] It would not be long before Davis's own iconic image would have a similarly empowering effect on young black and nonblack women and men throughout the world. To lesser and greater degrees, dramatic images of the Panthers (and their allies like Davis) awakened countless numbers of Negroes into African Americanness. The mass media became enamored of the Panthers, and provided them an audience many times larger than that attending the plays of Baraka, Bullins, and the whole tribe of black playwrights.

Black Panther Power Plays

As Angela Davis confirms, for many the Black Panther Party burst onto the national and international scene through those carefully staged events at the state capitol building in Sacramento with which this chapter began. For my purposes it is a nice coincidence that at the time the governor of California was Ronald Reagan, a man who himself had been an actor, and who would later play a starring role as president in a tragicomic, partly successful attempt in the 1980s to roll back many of the gains made by the wave of social movements that peaked in the 1960s.

The director and lead actor of the Sacramento action, Newton and Seale, had been friends at Merritt Junior College and later talked politics together in the Oakland Poverty Center where Seale worked. Seeing first-hand the limits of government poverty programs deepened their sense of the troubles in the black community and confirmed their belief that liberal reform would not touch those problems. Like their idol Malcolm, they understood the need for black people to organize themselves

independent of white influence, and the need to find allies in the wider (and whiter) society. In 1965 the assassination of Malcolm and the riots in Watts deepened their conviction that the black community needed new leadership. Their answer was to draft a Ten-Point Program for a group they called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.[15] The ten points included bold demands for decent housing, education in black history, full employment, and release of all people of color from military service (because they should not fight in a racist war in Vietnam) and from prisons (in white America their only real crime was being black). The document ended by quoting the Declaration of Independence to drive home the point that the black community was declaring independence from white supremacy.

The influences behind Black Panther ideology are summed up neatly by the allegorical naming of Chairman Bobby Seale's son, who was born during the black power era. Seale named the boy Malik Nkrumah Stagolee Seale. Malik, the Muslim name adopted by Malcolm X, represents the legacy of black nationalism in the U.S.; Nkrumah, for Kwame Nkrumah, famed leader of anticolonialism in Africa, represents the Third World internationalism of the Panthers; and Stagolee, notorious bad dude of black folklore, represents the Panthers' commitment to the ordinary street "brothas and sistas" of the black community.

This last identity is perhaps the most original contribution of the Panthers, for just as Baraka had put street dudes on the stage as characters, Black Panther theater took black street style and recoded it with a revolutionary new message. The aura of violence in the blues/folkloric image of Stagolee as the tough black dude (and to a lesser degree bluesy "nasty gals") gets transferred into a threat of black self-defense, and possibly offense, against whites. Many young black men and women, often after passing through the battle zones of riots/insurrections, began to transform the strut and stride of the street hustler into the assertive posture of the black revolutionary. Anthropologists and sociologists have long noted the deep importance of "performativity" in the black community, the premium put on highly stylized forms of behavior. In this cultural context, Panther style was substance. The black aesthetic movement popularized the expression "black is beautiful," but it was the beautiful men and women of the Panthers, standing erect, nattily dressed in black leather, arms raised in clenched-fist black power salutes, marching in tight formation, who gave body to the phrase. The Panthers

were nothing if not telegenic. The television screens in late 1960s America were filled with images of Panthers looking both black and powerful. The message contained in those theatrical gestures helped awaken thousands of black people to new ways of being, especially when backed by street-level organizing, powerful community word of mouth, and concrete programs.

While the Sacramento action was the party's most famous theatrical work, I would argue that it was merely an extension of the theatrical practice at the center of their activity. The Panthers also understood early on that they needed to win over the ghetto community with more than talk. They were not above such far-from-revolutionary acts as getting a stoplight installed in a dangerous intersection when the city power structure's indifference to black life had led to the death of several children. Informing the city officials that armed Panthers would stand guard at the intersection until a light was installed proved just the leverage needed to get the job done. Eventually they evolved a whole series of "survival programs" as interim offers of the many things demanded in the Ten-Point Program—including free food, education, clothing, medical care, and legal counseling.

A better known early part of the Panthers' dramatic presence in the black community took the form of their policing of the police. Panther members, armed with rifles and law books, would follow police officers around Oakland, patrolling for police brutality and other violations of the rights of black citizens of the city. In the spirit of the civil rights movement, they were creating an alternative, parallel institution. But this one was different. In effect, this strategy was the mirror image of that key civil rights movement strategy, civil disobedience. Law books and civil codes were used to symbolize that the police were engaged in uncivil disobedience to law, and that the Panthers were there to enforce the letter of the law. The action reversed the gaze of surveillance, so that the watchers were now the ones being watched.

Carrying guns was meant to challenge symbolically the state's monopoly on the use of violence, and to give notice that guns used to enforce white supremacy would be met by black self-defense. Realizing that legal fictions covered up oppressive practices, the Panthers were not attacking the law but exposing its racist application. Where in the South segregation laws were the clear enemy, in the North a more complex situation existed in which putatively equal laws rendered invisible *de facto*

segregation in housing and employment, unequal schools, and routine police harassment and brutality for the unwritten crime of being black in white America.

As an article in the party paper summarized their position: "The Black Panther Party recognizes, as do all Marxist revolutionaries, that the only response to the violence of the ruling class is the revolutionary violence of the people. The Black Panther Party recognizes this truth not as some unspecified Marxist-Leninist truism, but as the basic premise of relating to the colonial oppression of Black people in the heartland of Imperialism where the white ruling class, through its occupation police forces, agents and dope peddlers, institutionally terrorizes the Black community. Revolutionary strategy for Black people in America begins with the defensive movement of picking up the Gun, as the condition for ending the pigs' reign of terror by the Gun."[16]

The Panthers knew that their actions would be seen very differently in the "two Americas, one white, one Black" described in the U.S. government's official report on the civil disturbances rocking the ghetto. Bobby Seale's discussion of Newton's planning around the Sacramento "invasion" (as the white world reported it) shows his clear sense of this dual audience: "When brother Huey planned Sacramento he said, 'Now the papers are going to call us thugs and hoodlums.'... But the brothers on the block who the man's been calling thugs and hoodlums for 100 years, they're going to say, 'Them's some out of sight thugs and hoodlums up there.'"[17] Indeed, events like Sacramento brought the "brothers" and the "sisters" pouring into the organization. In less than two years, there were Panther chapters in cities around the country, including New York; New Haven, Connecticut; Raleigh, North Carolina; Detroit, Michigan; Chicago; and Los Angeles. The party's newspaper, *The Black Panther*, had a peak circulation of nearly 140,000 by 1970. A Harris poll done for *Time* Magazine in March 1970 found that one out of four blacks in America had a "great deal of admiration" for the Panthers. A Market Dynamics/ABC poll taken later that same year found the Panthers judged to be the organization "most likely" to increase the effectiveness of the black liberation struggle. Two-thirds of blacks polled showed admiration for the organization, despite by that time four years of vilification in the white press and constant harassment by law enforcement.

Does this mean that Black Panther revolutionary ideology was embraced by the black community? Probably not. It was far more likely

that Black Panther theater was embraced by the community in the sense that images of proud black men and women in black berets facing down cops gave evidence of a new kind of black person in the world, one who would not bow to racism any more. In this sense, Black Panther theater proved far more successful than the specifics of Black Panther ideology, though the former sometimes carried with it significant elements of the latter, especially for the hundreds who were drawn by those images to join the party.

The task of playing along the line I have been sketching between "poetics" and "politics," and between two very different audiences, was a very tricky one. Some of the difficulties are clear in this interview of Panther David Hilliard with two CBS correspondents, George Herman and Ike Pappas, and *Washington Post* reporter Bernard Nossiter on 28 December 1969.

MR. PAPPAS: ... I was at the [anti–Vietnam War] Moratorium Day ceremonies and I heard [you say] "We will kill Richard Nixon. We will kill anyone. Any blankety-blank who stands in the way of our freedom." And it is a very simple question: Do you think Richard Nixon is standing in the way of your freedom? Number two, would you kill him?

MR. HILLIARD: ... I would say that Richard Nixon is the chief spokesman for the American people. He is the highest official in this land. If Richard Nixon stands in opposition to freedom guaranteed to us under the alleged constitution, then the man is designated as enemy. But I did not and I will not here designate—I will not take responsibility of saying assassinate anybody.

MR. NOSSITER: Well, what you are suggesting, Mr. Hilliard, is that this was a metaphor, a figure of speech out in San Francisco.

MR. HILLIARD: I am saying that it was political rhetoric. We can call it a metaphor. It is the language of the ghetto. This is the way we relate. Even the profanity, the profanity is within the idiom of the oppressed people. So in the context of that speech I said that and I am not going to take that back.

MR. NOSSITER: Okay. Then let me ask you this: Is your revolutionary—are your revolutionary slogans, are these too metaphors? Is this also rhetoric or do Panthers literally believe that a violent overthrow of the government must take place in this country?

MR. HILLIARD: Let's just say this: Let's say that we could have our freedom without a shot being fired, but we know that the imperialists, that the fascists on a very local level would not withdraw from the arena without violence. They have proven themselves very violent and thus

far haven't done anything to insure us our freedom. We were in the forefront of peaceful demonstrations for peace abroad, while right here at home we are being victims of attacks day and night by the criminal agencies manifested in police departments. Our slogan is that we want an abolition to war, but we do understand that in order to get rid of the gun it will be necessary to take up the gun.[18]

Hilliard is trying tortuously to add nuance to a discussion the journalists want to force into easy oppositions. He is trying to talk about the violence of racism as it affects the black community in America, and he is arguing that the possibility of radical change without violence has been rejected by the powers that be. He is also suggesting that his "political rhetoric" performed for a black audience (in "the language of the ghetto") is systematically misheard by the white world. He is even willing to grant that his violent talk is a "metaphor," but at the same time he does not want to lose its force as a "weapon" of change justified as defense against racist and "imperialist" violence. As the party did often, Hilliard is pointing to the hypocrisy of a power structure that drops tons of bombs on Vietnam and exercises police brutality daily in the ghettos and yet criticizes the violence of his mere words.

While the Leninist-Maoist rhetoric of the Panthers could at times become numbing, it was often combined with enough street-smart "jive" to serve as radical political education. Just as the cool hustler became the cool revolutionary, the fast-talking jive of the street became a machine-gun fast rhetoric uniting class and racial analysis: "The United States of America is a barbaric organization controlled and operated by avaricious, sadistic, bloodthirsty thieves. The United States of America is the Number One exploiter and oppressor of the whole world. The inhuman capitalistic system which defines the core reality of the United States is the root of the evil that has polluted the very fabric of existence."[19] As Nikhil Singh points out, the Panthers had dramatic success in their "attempts to politicize and reshape the frequently episodic and disjointed life-world of urban, Black subalterns by replacing everyday violence and temporary fulfillments of hustling and surviving with a purposive framework for political action."[20]

Most of the dramatic impact of the Panthers came not in the form of shootouts, but in day-to-day performances: speeches, marches into demonstrations and rallies, press conferences, and so forth. They were

an unmistakable presence both in the black community and in the white media, especially television. As Van Deburg remarks, the "black power movement brought irrevocable changes in the Afro-Americans' attitudes both about themselves and about the legitimacy of the white world order."[21] No single force moved those changes along more than the attitudes projected in both the rhetoric and the iconographic postures of the Panthers. While to many the Panthers may have seemed to be engaging in mere posturing, to many others their revolutionary posture spoke volumes about no longer knuckling under to white power. Those people may not have believed that a revolution was at hand, but they got the message that only a new kind of black person would dare even to speak revolution to the white world.

Panther Party Organization and Ideology

The organizational pattern chosen by Newton and Seale for their new party was essentially a military one. Feeling that black people on the street needed discipline, they structured the Black Panther Party as a rigid hierarchy with a central committee made up of various ministers (of defense, information, culture, and so forth), and emphasized military-style training in arms use and marching in formation. The Marxist vanguard element was based on the idea that "the people" needed to be educated to their oppressed condition and have resistance to oppression modeled for them by a dedicated cadre of revolutionary activists. In contrast to the organizing tradition invoked in the southern struggle, the party took a position, derived indirectly from Lenin and Mao, that radical change needed to be pushed by an enlightened elite.

While the rigidity of this organizational structure would come to haunt the party, the Panthers espoused an open-ended, coalitional politics that allowed them to evolve politically over time. Newton describes the main changes he, as the party's chief theorist, did much to shape:

> In 1966 we called . . . ourselves Black Nationalists because we thought that nationhood was the answer. Shortly after that we decided that what was really needed was a revolutionary nationalism, that is a nationalism plus socialism. After analyzing conditions a little more, we found that it was impractical and even contradictory. . . . We saw that in order to be free we had to crush the ruling circle and therefore we had to unite with the peoples of the world. So we called ourselves Internationalists. . . . But

> since no nation exists [in a transnational world], and since the United States is in fact an empire, it is impossible for us to be Internationalists. These transformations and phenomena require us to call ourselves "intercommunalists" because nations have been transformed into communities of the world.[22]

The Panthers were a key force in the development of a Third World/internal colonial position that featured alliances with postcolonial and revolutionary groups in the developing world, and alliances with other radicals of color within the United States. The rhetorical/political trick of identifying U.S. people of color as part of the Third World transformed an American "minority" into a global "majority." The Panthers developed alliances with revolutionary groups in Cuba, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, and with U.S. radicals including the American Indian Movement (AIM), the Chicano Brown Berets, the Puerto Rican Young Lords, and the Asian American I Wor Keun (Red Guard). They also allied themselves with white radicals like those in the Peace and Freedom Party and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

Late in the 1960s the Panthers made connections also to feminist and gay liberationist groups. The clearest example of this is a piece Newton published as a pamphlet in 1970, and reissued in 1972, as part of a collection of his essays and speeches, *To Die for the People,* edited by Toni Morrison. Entitled "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements," the essay was apparently prompted in part by his friend, the French playwright Jean Genet, known for his radical gay views. Newton wrote, "We haven't established a revolutionary value system; we're only in the process of establishing it. I don't remember us ever constituting any value that said that a revolutionary must say offensive things towards homosexuals, or that a revolutionary should make sure that women do not speak out about their own particular kind of injustice. . . . [We Panthers] say that we recognize the women's right to be free. We haven't said much about the homosexual at all, and we must relate to the homosexual movement because it's a real thing. And I know through reading and through my life experience, my observations, that homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in society. Maybe they might be the most oppressed people in the society."[23] These statements, and the alliances built to put them into practice, undercut the isolation and freezing of "blackness" that limited the effectiveness of many other black nationalist organizations. To be sure, the Panthers did not always practice what they preached, but they left a legacy of struggle with multiple forms of oppression that has often been lost in histories of black power that deal only with race and in recent forms of neo-nationalism that claim the Panther legacy but remain sexist and homophobic, and treat blackness as a cultural or biological essence, rather than as a historically constructed and changing strategic identity.

These ideological positions are an important legacy for those who care about progressive change in black America. They can serve as an antidote to insular black separatist versions of nationalism that isolate the black community from the kind of wider alliances that alone can bring significant, structural economic and political change. It is important to realize that the Panthers' larger ideological gestures were always matched by the specific demands of the Ten-Point Program, and by their everyday actions in bringing food, medicine, education, transportation, childcare, and elder care to the communities via the survival programs.

Courtroom Dramas and Acts of Repression

The inability, or unwillingness, of the white world and its forces of law and order to appreciate the distinctions Hilliard and other Panthers labored to explain meant that the real theatricality of the Panthers' violent rhetoric led to much real violence in the form of gunfights with the police. From the police patrols onward, the Panthers had always been extremely careful to know and work within the law. When the law they were protesting in Sacramento was passed, for example, they immediately stopped the armed police patrols. Not surprisingly, Panther street theater, with its use of former real-life street "hoodlums" among the supporting cast, did not play so well to law enforcement audiences. Not only did the local Oakland police dedicate themselves to stamping out the organization, but soon FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared the Panthers the "most dangerous extremist group in America." Eventually, so many FBI-placed "extras" (infiltrators) became part of Panther dramas that the question of who was writing the script becomes impossible to answer.

A murderous cat-and-mouse game, in which the cool-cat Panthers came more and more to look like the mice, began to unfold. It became increasingly difficult for the party to uphold its claim to be working within the letter of the law. Those Sacramento protesters had been


THE SACRAMENTO BEE

CAPITOL IS INVADED

Press Corps Draws Ire Of Legislator

State Police Halt Armed Negro Band

11 MIGs Are Destroyed By US Jets

Governor Urges

Black Panthers invade the California state capitol. Courtesy of the *Sacramento Bee*.

arrested, with most getting six-month sentences. This continued a pattern already set by the Oakland police, and dozens of harassing arrests followed. Most of these trumped-up arrests ended in acquittals, but even those tied up the organization's funds and personnel for years to come. In select cases, notably that of party chairman Huey Newton himself, arrested for the alleged murder of a police officer, the trials became national and international events. Though eventually acquitted of the crime after a series of trials, Newton spent three years in prison, from 1967 to 1970. Those were crucial years for the party. While Newton continued to try to direct that Panthers from inside prison walls, and a massive "Free Huey" campaign became a major rallying point and fundraising source for the group, the loss was considerable. Much of the time Panther theater was reduced to the "radical chic" drawing room dramas lampooned by conservative new journalist Tom Wolfe. These well-staged shakedowns of rich and guilty white liberals proved effective in raising funds but did little to push the revolution forward.[24]

Co-founder Seale also became involved in a major courtroom drama when he and seven white radicals became the notorious Chicago Eight, charged with fomenting the confrontations surrounding the Democratic

Party convention in Chicago in 1968. Seale's co-defendants included Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the clown princes of the white new left and founders of the surrealist, countercultural Youth International Party, or Yippies. The theatrical Yippie organizers came to their trial dressed in the costumes of the American Revolution and did their best (and their best was very good) to turn the courtroom into a circus. Denied a change of lawyer, Seale was forced to represent himself in the trial. He soon so irritated the judge, Julius Hoffman (whom Abbie facetiously called Uncle Julie), that he was declared in contempt, and ordered bound and gagged in the courtroom. This image of Seale, the sole black defendant, receiving not blind but shackled and gagged justice in the white man's courtroom played powerfully in the court of black public opinion, confirming the Panthers' longstanding claim that they faced only kangaroo courts, not courts of justice.

With key leaders already in jail, the FBI and other agencies unleashed a sweeping, vicious program of repression against the Panthers and other radicals in the late 1960s through COINTELPRO (short for Counter Intelligence Program). Between 1967 and 1971 COINTELPRO employed more than seven thousand undercover agents and police informers to infiltrate the Panthers and other radical groups with the mission of disrupting their efforts by any means necessary. This included falsifying documents in an attempt to create power struggles within the organization and between the Panthers and other black radical groups. Most COINTELPRO efforts were focused on increasing the level of violence among the Panthers; in at least one case this meant providing dynamite to a Panther chapter.[25] The state was attempting to erase the distinction between self-defense and offense, and it successfully forced a literalization of Panther theater. Pushing the Black Panther Party across the line from symbolic to literal violence was one of the main goals of COINTELPRO.

The two most important intellectuals influencing the black power movement, Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X, both had argued that violence was one of the necessary means of awakening Negroes into the power of blackness. Fanon, writing in the context of anticolonial struggles of Third World majority populations ousting white minorities, analyzed how in revolutionary situations symbolic violence could turn into armed struggle. But the late 1960s in America was not a revolutionary situation in the military sense. The Panthers' genius was in showing that the threat

of violent self-defense could be used to expose the everyday violence of police brutality and the structural violence of poverty. In March 1968, the Panther minister of information expressed it this way in the party paper: "Let us make one thing crystal clear: We do not claim the right to indiscriminate violence. We seek no bloodbath. We are not out to kill up white people. On the contrary, it is the cops who claim the right to indiscriminate violence and practice it everyday. It is the cops who have been bathing black people in blood and who seem bent on killing off black people."[26] Unfortunately, both the police and some elements within the Panthers were not so "crystal clear" on this distinction, and soon a series of not-so-revolutionary pitched gun battles began. The government's efforts to increase the level of violence in the Panthers testify tellingly to the foolishness of violence in a nonrevolutionary situation. Or, in my terms, they testify to the necessity of maintaining the distinction between theatrical violence and violent theatrics. Doing so might have extended the longevity of the Panther Party, not to say the lives of many Panther members.

Many encounters between police and the party, like the killing of Chicago Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, were effectively political assassinations by the alleged upholders of "law and order." Hampton and Clark were shot dead in their beds in a predawn raid in December 1969. Some eighty thousand Chicagoans paid homage to the slain Panthers and checked out for themselves the truth of the police version of the events by taking a Panther-sponsored tour of the murder scene. Other encounters were more ambiguous or implicate some Panthers in their own undoing. Where claims of self-defense and rhetorical evocations of revolutionary violence often stirred "the people," the actual gun battles that led to so many dead and imprisoned Panthers had a chilling effect on resistance. By the end of 1969, 30 Panthers faced capital punishment charges, 40 faced life imprisonment, 55 faced terms of up to thirty years, and another 155 were in jail or being pursued by the law.[27] Many of these Panthers were not as lucky in their verdicts as leader Newton had been; several are still in prison thirty years after their convictions.[28] Getting caught up in gunfights with police played into the hands of the state, both because the government's greater force showed up the weakness of the would-be revolutionary forces, and because the real battle at that moment was still the symbolic one, the battle to shift the consciousness of forces for and against radical change.

With a lot of help from agents provocateurs from the FBI and dozens of other branches of "law enforcement," the Panthers lost that delicate balance achieved by Malcolm X—knowing the difference between rhetorical violence and very real bullets. Much liberal and some radical critique has faulted the Panthers for their use of violence. But any critique needs to sort out very different kinds of violence in and around the party. I agree with the position taken by one of the Panthers' most astute recent analysts, Nikhil Pal Singh:

> Generally, the evocation of trauma and failure is depicted as a question of who was the most violent during the 1960s, a discussion that proceeds as if violence is something transparent, rather than a concept in need of careful contextualization and theorization. Indeed, many accounts confirm this by regularly sliding between condemnation of Panther gunplay and criticism of their militant or violent rhetoric, as if these are the same thing, or as if one automatically produces the other. This collapse of politics and poetics spurs obsessional efforts at adjudication, at sorting out the innocent from the guilty, the victims from the villains, and deciding where the Panthers finally fall. The irony of this is that while the Panthers' rhetoric is often dismissed as inflated, overheated and out of touch, it invariably returns as the implicit cause and/or emblem of an all-too-real body count that effectively ends the discussion. What has resulted is a flattening and even erasure of the richness and ambiguity of the Panthers' racial and political self-fashioning, along with a more careful analysis and differentiation of the manifest and symbolic forms of violence that they deployed and confronted.[29]

As I have suggested, sorting out the "manifest and symbolic forms of violence" in the world of the Panthers is a difficult task. There is no doubt that the party's performances were riddled with "ambiguities," not to say contradictions. All sides of those contradictions have lessons to teach, and no side of them should be ignored, in celebration or in condemnation.

Curtain Time: The Decline and Fall of the Panthers

The Panthers' period of greatest influence, roughly 1966–71, was cut short by external repression and internal battles. Eventually Panthers not only fought and killed other black activists, like those in Ron Karenga's Los Angeles–based United Slaves (US), but also fought and killed each other. Feeling under siege from all sides, Newton made a decision in 1972 to further centralize the organization and move into the electoral arena.

He asked all Panthers from around the country to move to Oakland to strengthen the electoral base for a run for mayor by Bobby Seale and for city council by soon-to-be Panther Party chair Elaine Brown. Though Seale finished second among a host of candidates, he lost a runoff election. Brown too failed in her bid for a spot on the city council.

The party began to implode soon after the electoral failure. Paralleling founder Newton's descent into drug addiction and physical abuse of other Panthers, the party continued largely as a shadow of itself. Sorting out the gangsterism from the revolutionism during this phase is not always easy. But it is clear that when the revolutionism was thwarted, only gangsterism remained. The decline of the party is a sad tale indeed, not just on its own terms but for the ways in which it mirrors the decline in the wider black community from activism to despair to a gangster culture that for many was all that was left when radical resistance was suppressed.[30]

Debate continues to swirl as to whether internal dissension or external repression best accounts for the decline of the organization. Certainly the latter exacerbated the former. But it is too simple to let the party off the hook by seeing it purely as a victim. The original paramilitary structure of the party became increasingly centralized and authoritarian in ways that made it easy to foster paranoia in the leaders. The Panthers' failure to appreciate the extent of their symbolic power undermined their efforts to delegitimate the state's monopoly of violence. By playing into the hands of agents provocateurs ("law enforcement" agents paid to infiltrate the group and encourage violence), they left themselves vulnerable to hundreds of arrests and countless legal battles. They fatally confused militancy and militarism. Ultimately, this led to a lot of dead and imprisoned Panthers—a loss that permanently weakened the movement and sowed seeds of paranoia in the survivors. Strong doses of vanguardist elitism and masculinist egotism often cut leaders off from the grassroots forces in the party, while their hierarchical, clandestine, paramilitary organizational form also bred paranoia that left the Panthers vulnerable to this infiltration and disruption.

In addition to the structural problems, some of the people attracted to the party, including several in key leadership positions like Eldridge Cleaver and, in his later days, Newton himself, were "crazy mothafuckas" in far too literal a sense. Their personal pathologies, leading in Cleaver's

case to revolutionary fantasies and in Newton's case to drug addiction, deeply damaged the organization. If the Panthers had been a more democratic, grassroots organization, such leaders could have been held in check. Instead a star system emerged in Panther theatrics, with figures like Cleaver and Newton acting out a drama of little or no interest to the rest of the party, let alone the rest of black America.

However, the pathologies of some members should not obscure the dedication to improving the lives of millions of black (and other) Americans that motivated the several thousand, still largely unstudied "foot soldiers" of the party. One historian deeply critical of the party's self-destructive elitist and authoritarian streak notes, nevertheless, that "the Panthers contributed significantly to making America a more democratic, egalitarian, and human society. Party members led the movement to end police brutality and create civilian police-review boards. The BPP's free breakfast programs became a catalyst for today's free meals to poor school children. More than most progressive political groups, the party highlighted, connected to and protested U.S. oppression abroad and U.S injustice at home."[31] Panthers and Panther associates like Angela Davis also have been at the forefront of the prisoner rights movement. That movement continues to grow in the face of the massive expansion of the "prison-industrial complex," which has put more young black men in jail than in college.

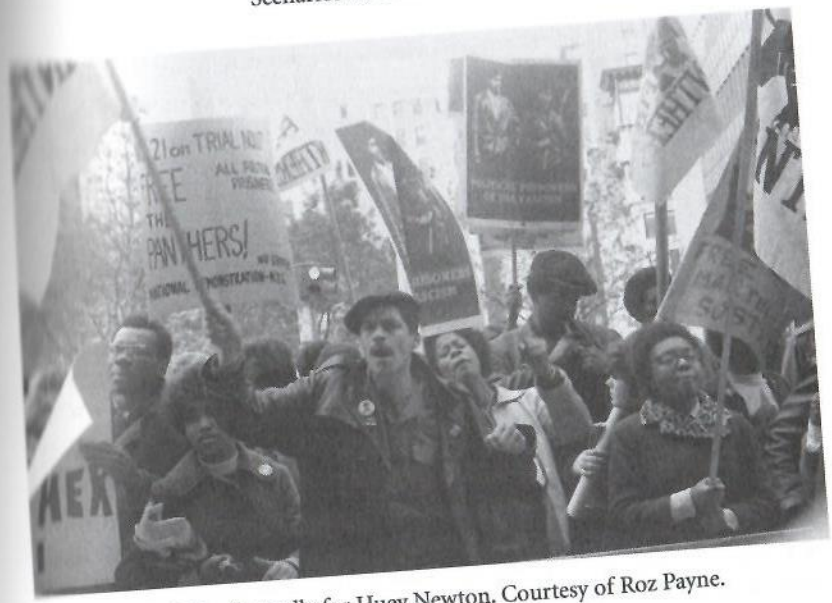
Beyond the Theater of the Gun

The problem with stressing the most violent scenes in the Panthers' theatrical repertoire is that this obscures other important dimensions of the party's legacy—for example, Huey Newton's strong stand against homophobia in mainstream and black communities, and his alliance with the emerging gay liberation movement in the early 1970s. It also tends to obscure the central role of women in the organization, and the ways in which they and some of the men challenged "male chauvinism" and misogyny inside and outside the party. Two-thirds of the party members were women. Some women held key positions, including, in the case of Elaine Brown, the top position.[32] The theater of guns also overshadows the less dramatic, daily work of the party: the petitions, the phone calls to the press, hawking the *Black Panther* newspaper on the streets, serving food in the breakfast program. While there were numerous showboaters,

especially among the men in the organization, there were also dedicated women and men who brought with them practical organizing skills. Perhaps it is telling that while all the party's media stars survived the black power era, the party's best grassroots organizer, Fred Hampton, was singled out for police assassination.

An overemphasis on violence also obscures the internationalism and the coalitional nature of the Panthers, their alliances with the external and internal Third World. Unlike many strands of black nationalism before, during, and since the black power era, Panther nationalism was not based on some unchanging notion of black identity. While mobilizing a sense of pride in blackness was important in the work of organizing their core constituency in the underclass, Panther politics was never an "identity politics." It involved coalitions with radical white groups and radicals of color in the United States and around the world. An often less remembered aspect of Panther theater is their actions on the world stage, where they enacted a foreign policy with regard to Cuba, Algeria, numerous African states, and China. Meetings of Panther leaders with heads of state in these countries dramatized a kind of secession of people of color from the United States and embodied the politics theorized by Newton as "intercommunalism." This was a community-to-community connection that bypassed the nation-state, and anticipated the kind of "globalization from below" being enacted by some on the left today.

Gun fetishism also obscures the less dramatic, but equally important pragmatic side of the party represented by the "survival programs"—the free breakfast programs, the schools, elder care, and health clinics. The party's electoral campaigns, though ultimately unsuccessful, provided another public stage for putting forth key elements of their revolutionary ideas. To romantic nationalists, these are signs of a sellout of the radical movement. In reality, they were among the strongest links to local communities and a key means through which radical ideas were disseminated. Most Panthers saw no contradiction between revolutionary rhetoric and "taking care of business" in the neighborhood through activities too easily labeled as reformist. Newton argued that hungry students are poor students, that the future of black and other poor communities, including future revolutionary possibilities, would be lost if children went hungry. The party characterized the survival programs as socialism in action, but also made it clear that these were stopgap measures, not



New York Black Panther rally for Huey Newton. Courtesy of Roz Payne.

the revolutionary change they fought for.[33] Refusing the easy dichotomy of reform versus revolution, the Panthers' survival programs were both much needed practical services and symbolic acts designed to show up the violence done by the lack of such services in white capitalist America.

Powers of Culture

As historian William Van Deburg puts it, "As a movement in and of culture, black power was itself an art form. In the words of Lerone Bennett Jr., it made 'everything political and everything cultural.'"[34] I would add, however, that while the political and the cultural can be collapsed into one by movements in moments of active struggle, they can also be driven asunder again. The message of Black Panther theater is twofold: first, that the cultural form called drama can be a vital political tool; second, that for the cultural to be truly effective politically, it must remain connected to social movement groups with a clear, explicit agenda for structural economic and political change.

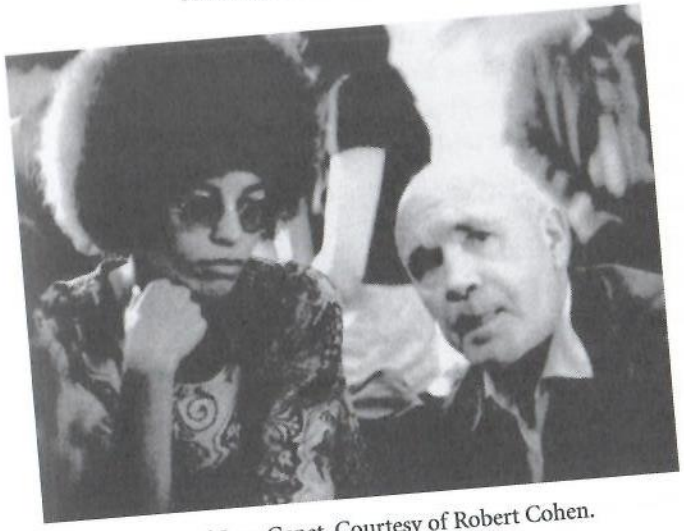
The Panthers' revolutionary rhetoric was most meaningful when tied to their famous Ten-Point Program and to their survival programs, a stirring mix of concrete demands and utopian vision.[35] When they ceased to organize at the grassroots level, they not only stalled the progress of

the revolution but left themselves without the protection once accorded them by the community (at one point early on, for example, community members prevented a planned police raid on party headquarters by massing outside, placing themselves between the Panthers and the police).

When the Panthers had been destroyed by COINTELPRO and their own internal difficulties, it did not prove difficult to turn revolutionary style into a mere style revolution. The Panthers' Stagolee as revolutionary was turned back into an apolitical black dude, or worse still into a cop, through a wave of "blaxploitation" films in the late 1970s, such as *Shaft*. African garb (dashiki robes for men, headdresses for women, tiki necklaces for both) and "natural" hair (mimicking the revolutionary "Afro" of Angela Davis and Panther women) soon became the commodified signs of blackness empty of political meaning. To paraphrase the words of Panther Bobby Seale, power does not grow out of the sleeve of a dashiki. But, contra Seale's pal Huey Newton's paraphrase of Mao, neither does power grow out of the barrel of a gun, at least not when the other side has an endless and more powerful supply.

The real weapon of the Panthers was a sense of how to deploy theatrically powerful imagery to evoke a sense of black power in the black underclass. The survival programs and the Ten-Point Program's call for "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace," when combined with dramatic images of black women and men standing up to the powers of the U.S. government, helped create a new kind of black person. At their best, the Panthers dramatically melded questions of black identity to questions of economic, political, and cultural change. By contrast, theatricality without organizing severely limits the depth of change. Put in the terms of this analysis, the Panthers provided too few spaces for average black Americans to take part as actors, not spectators, in their dramatic actions for change.

As playwright Jean Genet, for a time a close confidant of Panther leaders, put it, "Wherever they went [in the world], Americans were the masters, so the Panthers would do their best to terrorize the masters by the only means available to them. Spectacle."[36] By at times confusing their spectacular revolutionary theater with a revolutionary situation, the Panthers ultimately squandered a good deal of their "black power." But as Frantz Fanon wrote in that key 1960s text, *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Decolonization never takes place unnoticed for it transforms



Angela Davis and Jean Genet. Courtesy of Robert Cohen.

individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them."[37]

For a brief but utterly transformative moment, the Black Panthers turned the glare of history's floodlights onto the Third World inside and outside the United States, and turned many colonized spectators into privileged actors on the world stage.

Panther Legacies in Hip-Hop Scenarios

A vast amount of cultural criticism, particularly from black feminist and "womanist" authors, has profoundly rethought the nature and limits of black nationalism in the years since the Panthers' heyday. As is often the case with movements, their very successes become in turn problems. In the case of black power, its successes have resulted in a certain level of black nationalism becoming "common sense" in black communities. But as Gramsci argues, "common sense" is the seat of both useful and useless ideas. And in becoming common sense, less useful ideas become deeply entrenched, taken for granted, and difficult to dislodge. The diffusion of black power movement ideas into everyday life, as Wahneema Lubiano, among others, has argued, has led to both positive values and dangerously unreflective ones.[38] In particular, the sexist, homophobic, and essentialist dimensions of black power have often carried over in

the process of translation from movement ideology to common sense. I want to end this chapter by looking at one "dramatic" site where this positive and negative process is at work, the cultural formation surrounding "rap" music and "hip-hop" culture.

One key factor in the relative success of social movements seeking to better the lives of poor, marginalized people in the 1960s was the widespread perception that the great American economic pie was getting bigger and bigger. And this perception was generally right; the period between the end of World War II and the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 saw the largest, most sustained economic growth in human history. The American economy, initially free of any competition given the devastating effects of World War II on other national economies, meant tremendous financial gain reaped, unevenly to be sure, by most citizens of the country.

But by the mid-1970s President Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" was long gone, and soon a war on the poor was taking its place. Amid a sense that the pie had stopped growing, fear of competition from minorities fueled a white backlash that eventually segued into the "voodoo economics" of President Ronald Reagan, boldly robbing the poor to fatten the rich. Devastating new levels of poverty in inner cities arose when whites flocked in great numbers to the suburbs, leaving a tax base too small to adequately deal with even the basic need for schools and neighborhood safety for the people of color left behind.

Out of these conditions, there emerged in the late 1970s a powerful cultural force in black and Latino communities, creating art forms—especially rap/hip-hop music—that had strong links to black and brown nationalism. The rap music and hip-hop culture that arose out of the devastation of inner-city ghettos and barrios was from the beginning a highly schizophrenic phenomenon. The first two rap songs to make the move from neighborhood folk culture to the national pop culture reflect this split. One of those songs, "Rapper's Delight," by the Sugar Hill Gang, was, as the title implies, a fairly lighthearted, commercially marketable piece of fluff. The other song to emerge, "The Message," by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, was, as its title implies, a song that had something to say—in this case a strong, clear message of anger about the horrendous conditions in the inner city. For the next two decades, complicated variations on rap as delight and rap as political message vied for the airwaves. The two sides of rap, of course, intermingled, for the line between message and entertainment is never absolute.[39]

Certain rap groups and artists like Public Enemy, Paris, and Dead Prez clearly took some of their messages from the Black Panthers. Their efforts display both the strengths and weaknesses of rap as a political art and the Panthers as role models. On the one hand, messages found in some rap lyrics have played a role in keeping black nationalist discourses generally, and the name Black Panthers specifically, alive during a movement doldrum period. At the same time, while paying homage to the Panthers, many rappers have displayed an ideological confusion that shows their limited understanding of the Panthers or replicates their least admirable dimensions.

The late Tupac Shakur illustrates several levels of contradiction. His stories of black pride and empowerment were important ones for many young black men and women. At the same time, his songs, and even more his videos, often played into the hands of commercial sexism and materialism. And Tupac's hip-hop homage to women like his Black Panther mother Afeni Shakur inadvertently played into a family-values scenario worthy of a conservative Republican.[40] Other black nationalist rappers have had too little to say about sexism and homophobia in other rappers, and have sometimes shown evidence of both in their own music, despite corrective jabs from feminist rappers like Queen Latifah, Salt 'n' Peppa, and Roxanne Shante.

In addition, as Angela Davis has noted, Public Enemy sometimes deified and reified the masculinist paramilitary "look" of the Panthers, rather than their political substance. Ideological confusion is also demonstrated when self-proclaimed Panther rapper Paris, among others, embraces the socially conservative Nation of Islam along with the revolutionary socialist Panthers.[41] But, as I have shown, the Panthers too were riddled with contradictions. And certain rap acts remain among the most important forces of resistance in black communities. Rappers are among the most likely voices to spark new national movements for economic, social, and political change. Many are doing just that now at the local level. From the Stop the Violence movement of the 1980s to the Speak Truth to Power Tour in 2003, "conscious hip-hop" has embraced the best legacy of the Black Panthers—those points where brilliant theatricality connect to concrete, grassroots efforts to change the world.

Appendix: Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party

October 1966 Black Panther Party
Platform and Program
What We Want
What We Believe

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.

We believe that Black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.

2. We want full employment for our people.

We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

3. We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community.

We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules was promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people. We will accept the payment as currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over twenty million Black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.

4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.

We believe that if the white landlords will not give decent housing to our Black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.

5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.

We believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like Black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary.

7. We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people.

We believe we can end police brutality in our Black community by organizing Black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our Black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all Black people should arm themselves for self defense.

8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.

We believe that all Black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.

9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.

We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that Black people will receive fair trials. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A

peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the Black community from which the Black defendant came. We have been, and are being tried by all-white juries that have no understanding of the "average reasoning man" of the Black community.

10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations–supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony in which only Black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their national destiny.

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. *That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.* Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. *But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.*

THREE

The Poetical Is the Political

Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women's Rights

> For women, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, and then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought.
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> —Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider*

No social movement in the past fifty years has had a greater cultural impact than the women's movement, which reemerged in the 1960s and has grown in multifaceted ways into the present. The tremendous impact of feminism in everyday life includes, but extends far beyond, changes in laws, legislation, and political institutions. The texture of the life of every single person living in the United States was changed by the new feminism.

Here is a short list of ideas about women that were unimaginably radical for most American men and women to think, let alone endorse, up to the 1960s, which are now viewed largely as common-sense statements.

- Women as a group have a right to earn as much as men.
- Traditionally defined women's jobs (nurses, maids, elementary school teachers, childcare workers) should be paid at a rate comparable to similar work done by men.
- There are few, if any, jobs that women can't do.
- Women should have equal access to higher education, including fields traditionally reserved for men.